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Porn as a Pathway to Empowerment? A Response to Peterson's Commentary

Sharon Lamb

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Abstract In my article on the idealization of female adolescent sexuality, I raised questions for feminist theorists and researchers about our theorizing about "desire", "pleasure", and "subjectivity". Zoe Peterson's commentary on this article responds to one of 5 critical points I make, that the description of the ideal sexual adolescent who feels pleasure, desire, and subjectivity may be ironically similar to the commodified, sexualized, marketed teen girl. Here I correct some misrepresentations of my point of view in Peterson's commentary and reply to first her warning that to interpret girls differently than they interpret themselves is akin to dismissing their voices and second to her idea that a porn-influenced expression of sexuality can be seen as a step in the direction of sexual empowerment.

Keywords Adolescent · Girls · Empowerment · Desire · Pornography

In my paper on the idealization of female adolescent sexuality, I raised questions for feminist theorists and researchers about our theorizing about "desire", "pleasure", and "subjectivity" (Lamb 2010b, this issue). After presenting some history that served to explain how these ideas developed to become markers of a healthy sexuality for adolescent girls, I identified several problems with their use: 1. That focusing on female subjectivity may reify the dichotomy between subject and object; 2. that notions of desire, pleasure, and subjectivity may have different historical meanings and context for girls of color; 3. that using pleasure as a gauge for whether sex is "good" has moral implications that may undermine other important goals of feminism; 4. that a healthy sexuality that includes all these elements may be unrealistic to achieve; and 5. that the description of the ideal sexual adolescent who feels pleasure, desire, and subjectivity may be ironically similar to the commodified, sexualized, marketed teen girl. In her commentary, Peterson focuses on the last point (2010, this issue). In so doing she occasionally makes arguments quite similar to my own while giving the impression that I claimed something different in my original piece. Before addressing her interesting argument with regard to the development of empowerment in adolescent girls, I correct some of the more important places where I believe my thinking is misrepresented.

In my article, I suggest that feminists' goals for adolescent girls as they are theorized, goals of full-bodied desire, pleasure, and subjectivity, are too ambitious and suggest we might relax these goals in support of a more developmental model. I wrote, "Does it not sound too idealistic? In this era of the 'supergirl' in the U.S. (GirlsInc. 2006), it seems worrisome to be setting out for girls yet another path to perfection" (Lamb 2010b, this issue). I also wrote, "it would seem that they (feminist theorists) are requiring of girls something adult women still struggle with" (Lamb 2010b, this issue). Peterson makes this same point but she makes it in a way that suggests she is arguing with me when we actually agree. She writes, "We cannot expect adolescent girls to achieve unambivalent sexual empowerment when most (or all) adult women (and men) have yet to accomplish that goal" (2010, this issue). This is a point I agree with and note that Muehlenhard and Peterson

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(2005, p. 15) cite me as a person who has written about the ambivalence that adolescent girls and others feel about sex.

Another problem phrase, where Peterson's writing suggests I believe something I do not, is when she states, "Lamb contrasts authentic, empowered sexuality with self-sexualization" (2010a, in press). I do contrast these two positions, however, the way that phrase is written could imply to a reader that I advocate for an "authentic" sexuality. Rather, I write that the feminist theorists I critique contrast authenticity to self-sexualization and that I believe that representing any version of sexuality as "authentic" is problematic.

More generally speaking, Peterson's discussion seems to set me up as a straw woman in a tired third wave vs. second wave argument, my playing the role of the older anti-sex feminist, and Peterson playing the role of the younger pro-sex feminist, she pro-experimentation while I am presumed to want to keep adolescent girls buttoned up and silenced. Anyone who has read my work on the sexual development of girls (Lamb 2002), addressing sexual issues in therapy with children and adolescents (Lamb 2006), and on the media's influences on girls' development (Lamb and Brown 2006) would know that this is not my position and that I support sexual experimentation as a venue for girls' sexual development. On the other hand, I am interested in exploring where girls get their ideas for what counts as sexual experimentation and how these ideas are marketed and influenced by a multibillion dollar industry. We can't ignore the damage that might cause. This is a point I take up below.

Having corrected these points, I welcome the interesting discussion Peterson presents on what is empowerment. In fact, shifting the conversation from a conversation about "desire" to a conversation about "empowerment" (internal vs. objective and external) addresses one of the points I made with regard to the romanticizing language of girls' internal feelings of empowerment and the waxing eloquent on the term "desire". Peterson's discussion about the relationship between internal feelings of empowerment, external expressions of it, and access to resources that give a girl power is an important one. We agree with respect to the need to ask about the relationship between internal feelings of empowerment and actual empowerment. As I wrote in my article, I do see these as interconnected. But I do think that we ought to be careful about putting empowerment on a continuum, because this implies an endpoint to be reached. Peterson's own work on ambivalence shows that empowerment will be multidimensional and even for adult women remain complex and never an all-or-none accomplishment.

Peterson introduces Riger's (1993) definition of empowerment to this discussion. In Riger's definition, empowerment means having access and control over resources and Peterson writes that "it may make less sense" to think about empowerment as such "when we are discussing sexual empowerment, as it would seem nearly impossible to objectively assess how sexual resources are distributed within a society or even within an individual sexual relationship" (2010, this issue). I want to point out, however, that Fine and McClelland do just that, that is, they show that there are unequal distribution of sexual resources. In their 2006 article they lay out the unequal distribution of sexual information, education, and contraception implying that these resources can, if we can procure them for girls and boys, provide a context in which girls' internal feelings of desire can be supported.

One important issue Peterson revisits is to what extent researchers and theorists have an obligation to trust girls' lived and felt experiences. Peterson mistakenly describes me as dismissing girls' experiences: "However, to dismiss girls' subjective experiences of sexual empowerment (even if it is *(sic)* influenced by pornographic media images or by male models of desire and pleasure) as a misperception or 'false consciousness' seems invalidating to girls and thus contrary to the goals of empowerment" (2010, this issue). Rather than dismiss girls' lived experiences, I identify that acknowledging their thoughts about their own experiences is a problem for theorists and researchers, a problem which we may not be able to resolve: "Both of these discourses are problematic: the romanticized discourse of the "natural girl" whose own authentic desire will come free once she recognizes commercial and ideological forces; the choosing girl who chooses an inner sexuality after recognizing ideological forces" (Lamb 2010b, this issue). To construe my position as dismissing girls' voices is wrong. On the other hand, I don't, as Peterson suggests she might, honor as true and authentic every expressed feeling a girl may have. She writes that if girls can't trust their own feelings, they are "left with no compass to point the way toward healthier sexuality" (2010, this issue). Peterson thus reflects in that statement one of the very problems I point out in my essay, that feminist theorists have asked girls to decontextualize and individualize their sexuality and look within to such an extent that the ideal sexual experience might be captured only when alone (see this issue). Rather than asking girls to look within to find authentic feelings of empowerment, we might instead give girls skills with which to critically examine the culture that is shaping them so that they can make choices that might truly be empowering. They then can use these skills to reflect on their inner feelings as well as society and examine the relationship between both.

Further along in this argument, Peterson writes, "if girls tell us that they feel pleasure and empowerment by embracing an overt and exhibitionist version of sexual expression, should we assume that we know better than they do about the underlying meaning of that expression"

(2010, this issue). Once again Peterson is setting up a binary of us and them in order to argue against it. Of course we as feminists should take into consideration the underlying meaning of girls' expressions of sexuality and this meaning will be different for different girls in their particular circumstances; yet some patterns will emerge. We should not only represent these voices but add to these voices nuanced interpretations as Tolman (2002), Thompson (1995), Fine (1988) and others, including Peterson, have done. Yet, and it seems obvious to remind anyone of this, sometimes we (theorists, researchers, adults, moms, and even dads) do see things about other people's meanings and expressions that they do not see. Isn't that what feminists do in qualitative analyses, in psychodynamic forms of psychotherapy, and in any critical reading of a text and a life? Surely there is a way of paying attention to an individual girl's perspective while also raising questions with regard to what her expressions mean at a particular time in history, and to take into consideration her circumstances such as her socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, and even media viewing without relying solely on her own words.

In some cases we (feminists, social critics, moms, dads, and others with an investment in understanding girls) do know more. But this doesn't necessarily mean that we tell girls what to feel and do, nor do we tell them they can't and shouldn't feel pleasure even if that pleasure comes from performing a pole dance for a group of high school boys! Our work instead is to help girls to understand larger social patterns that affect their individual judgments and feelings and to talk about the nature of gender relations. We ought to join them in conversation and have faith in their ability to critique themselves as well as the culture around them (Brown, 2003; Fine and McPherson, 1992; Pastor et al. 2007). This is what good sexuality education can do. This is what responsible parents and teachers do.

An important but distressing argument that Peterson sets forth is that enacting a pornified (Paul 2005) version of sex might be a form of experimentation on the pathway to empowerment. (We haven't agreed upon what is "pornified" and what is not, as shown by her putting the word in quotes. But for argument's sake, let's call lap dances and pole dances "pornified" although I am also thinking of the kind of false representations of pleasure that girls can perform during sex with boys.) If girls say that doing these things makes them feel empowered, should that be the end of the analysis? While we might take seriously the feeling that a girl has, it does her no dishonor to unpack why she might feel thus. And, most likely, the hypothetical girl we are discussing may not be expressing the whole story anyway when she says that what she is doing makes her feel empowered (Tolman 2002). As Peterson herself might argue, when girls enact a porn version of sex, they are most likely feeling ambivalent with regard to the way it makes them feel, ambivalent not only because of social messages about shame surrounding sex but because imitation can feel dishonest in human interactions.

Peterson also writes that just having the option to choose a pornified version of sex is a sign of progress on the path of empowerment for all girls and women. This is probably our strongest disagreement. As Fine (2005) warns us, we must not confuse sexual freedom with a commodified version of sexuality. Being able to choose among a host of models of sexuality is indeed a choice and it may be that the adult women Peterson has interviewed are in places and positions in life where they can play the porn star one night in bed and then play the marauding pirate the next, who can say no and yet feel ambivalent about both yeses and nos; but we must remember that we are speaking about adolescent girls now. What are the options that they have? Dines (in press) makes the point that the prominence of the pornified version of empowerment erases for many the idea of choice and experimentation. It represents a single pathway open rather than one of many ways to express power in sex. And it's exactly that overrepresentation of only one way for sexual pleasure to be represented that makes the idea of choice so problematic.

Finally, we can't forget the danger in this pathway, although "pathway" in itself suggests an array of choices. The pornography inspired version of sexual empowerment, (even though admittedly, playing around in pornographic ways can evoke a spirit of experimentation and even mockery) is tied to a multi-billion dollar industry that has at its center exploitation, not the eradication of shame with free sexuality. (This is similar to wearing make-up which ties girls and women to an industry which has at its heart exploitation of women's insecurities although the stakes there may not be as high.) The use of women's and girls' bodies for male pleasure is antithetical to equity and mutuality in sex, two hallmarks of sex that make sexual practices just and respectful (Lamb 2010a, in press). Sexual trafficking, child sexual abuse, rape, harassment are all dangers for girls and women here in this country and abroad, and are tied to the porn industry not only in symbolic ways but also in explicit ways (Dines, in press). Yet we don't have to look to these rather extreme examples of danger to girls and women. Recent research on "hook-ups" which Dines (in press) argues derive from porn culture, shows they're linked with regret (Bogle 2008), depression (Grello et al. 2006), and less pleasure (England and Thomas 2006) than one would think.

This is not to argue against sexual freedom and experimentation for girls but to say that the avenues for experimentation that are open to the majority of teen girls come from the porn industry, are sold to them as empowerment, and reflect the codes and conventions of pornographic media. A feminist view of the world and a

vision of what sexual experimentation *could* be is absent from the mainstream environments out of which teenage girls draw their ideas and feelings about sex and sexual empowerment. To our credit, we feminists have tried to combat such with these ideas of pleasure, desire, and subjectivitiy, and, in my paper, I believe I honored the history of this work. However, at this point in history and in the current context of commodified, pornified images of sexual empowerment, we as feminists need a different model for girls. Our efforts to promote empowerment through pleasure may not be enough to combat these wrongs and, in some cases, may even contribute to them. A feminist model that gives girls the skills to critique rampant objectification, and that also teaches about ethical sexual practice, based on respect, caring, and justice (Lamb 2010a, in press) can be a start. There is indeed danger as well as opportunity for sexual pleasure in the sexual world for adolescent girls, and experiencing desire may be protective and deserves to be a part of what girls learn in relation to sexuality, but they also need to understand the world and gender relations from a broader perspective, one that looks at the dangers presented to them as opportunities. And feminist theorists (as well as social critics, teachers, parents) have an obligation to offer them that perspective rather than romanticized ideals.

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